



**Office of the United States Attorney  
District of Arizona**

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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### **MULTI-AGENCY TASK FORCE ERADICATES MARIJUANA PLANTS IN THE COCONINO NATIONAL FOREST**

PHOENIX –This week, a large marijuana growing operation is being eradicated in the Coconino National Forest of Arizona by a multi-agency task force made up of local, State and Federal law enforcement. This eradication marks the latest of three separate grow operations eradicated in the same area of Arizona since July 24, 2005. This last grow operation, currently estimated to contain more than 20,000 plants, and valued at more than \$30,000,000 dollars (\$30 million) is one of the largest growing operations of marijuana ever found in Arizona. When coupled with two other marijuana growing operations eradicated at the end of July and in early August, the total number of marijuana plants eradicated is estimated to be approximately 100,000 plants, with a street value of approximately \$150,000,000 (\$150 million).

Federal charges were filed against four individuals on Tuesday by the U.S. Attorney's Office. These charges culminated from a joint investigation by the Gila County Violent Crime, Narcotic and Gang Task Force (comprised of the Arizona Department of Public Safety and the Gila County Sheriff's Office), the U.S. Forest Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Coconino County Sheriff's Office, and the Flagstaff Police Department. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest Region Special Operation Response Team consisting of National Wildlife Refuge Law Enforcement Officers also conducted surveillance activities and supported the take down of the marijuana grows. The eradication operation is still on-going.

Four individuals were arrested and charged with Conspiracy to Manufacture Marijuana in violation of Title 21, U.S. Code 841(a)(1). Charged were Jesus Castillo-Malendrez, 31; Gerardo Manzo-Pulido, 19; Oscar Nunez-Medina, 40; and David Valencia-Gonzalez, 28, all of Mexico. Nunez-Medina was also charged with violating Title 18, U.S. Code 922(g), Possession of Ammunition that has Affected Interstate Commerce by an Alien not Lawfully Present in the United States. All four had their initial appearance before U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark Aspey on August 16, 2005 in Flagstaff, Ariz. and will appear before Judge Aspey for their detention hearing and preliminary hearing at 10 a.m. on Thursday, August 18, 2005.

U.S. Attorney Paul K. Charlton said of this operation, "This was a monumental investigation and operation requiring and achieving the highest levels of cooperation from federal, state, and local

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officials. I applaud the exhausting efforts and professionalism exhibited by all these agencies in such an undertaking."

"The large scale cultivation of marijuana on public lands is an increasing concern for the Forest Service," said Robin Poague, Forest Service Southwest Region Patrol Commander. "From armed farmers posing a hazard to people out recreating to wide-scale environmental damage including large amounts of trash in our wilderness areas, these operations are a threat to the public good."

Gila County Sheriff John Armer stated that "This investigation demonstrates the success of the federal grant programs that provide funding for federal & state task forces statewide. In Arizona, those funds are administered by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission." Roger Vanderpool, Director of the Arizona Department of Public Safety, added that, "I am proud of the accomplishments of the Gila County Violent Crime, Narcotic and Gang Task Force. This operation is an excellent example of how the cooperation among law enforcement agencies can impact the flow of illegal drugs into the communities of Arizona and throughout the country."

DEA Special Agent in Charge Timothy J. Landrum stated, "This week law enforcement took down one of the most significant marijuana grow operations in Arizona history. International traffickers exploited a national park in our own backyard to cultivate thousands of marijuana plants hoping to line their pockets with millions in drug profits. Our eradication means that tons of marijuana never made it to our neighborhoods, and millions of dirty dollars never made it into the drug trade."

A conviction for Conspiracy to Manufacture Marijuana carries a mandatory minimum penalty of ten years in prison up to life in prison, a \$4 million fine or both. In determining an actual sentence, the assigned judge will consult the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

A criminal complaint is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and raises no inference of guilt. An individual is presumed innocent until competent evidence is presented to a jury that establishes guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The investigation preceding the complaint was conducted by the U.S. Forest Service, the Gila County Violent Crime, Narcotic and Gang Task Force (comprised of the Gila County Sheriff's Office and the Arizona Department of Public Safety), the Coconino County Sheriff's Office, the Flagstaff Police Department, DEA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The prosecution is being handled by Steven P. Logan, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

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